

Prisoner Reentry: What It Takes to Succeed

by Andre Norman

There are currently more than 2 million Americans who are incarcerated in our country's prison system. Of that, about 650,000 are released annually. This population will be faced with the challenges involved in reintegrating themselves back into society. The task is daunting and can be filled with disappointments, confusion, and a host of other emotions. Unfortunately, many who are released are unable to successfully make the transition to freedom and find themselves back behind bars; hence the high recidivism rate.

Based on both extensive professional and personal experience, I have identified several things that newly released prisoners need to know to increase the likelihood that they will stay free and succeed in life. This advice is designed to help not only ex-prisoners, but their families and the support programs that work with them.

Anything is possible, but a common sense time-table and plan are vital. Ex-prisoners come home and have a number of lofty aspirations. Whether it's starting their own business, graduating from school, reconnecting with family, traveling, or becoming a millionaire, a realistic timetable and plan are vital. The prison experience often generates a sense of urgency in those who go through it. While understandable, the mindset that accompanies the newly released prisoner is often counterproductive to achieving his or her goals and objectives.

Ex-prisoners need to have short-, medium-, and long-term objectives that contribute to the realization of their goals. Small steps that generated results, as opposed to big ones that may end in frustration, are preferable. Help is available in developing timetables and plans through local mentoring programs, colleges, business development programs and other non-profit organizations.

The doorway back into prison is controlled by the prisoner. The probation and parole officers are not your enemy. An ex-prisoner's freedom is completely determined by what he or she does. No one else is responsible for what happens to them. In this way, power is in the hands of the ex-prisoner. Parole and probation officers are bound by rules and regulations. The only way that the ex-prisoner is returned to prison is if he or she violates any of the terms and conditions of his/her release. Whether or not "the rules" seem small or not, they must be scrupulously obeyed. Those who are newly released from incarceration often view their parole and probation officers as their enemies whose sole purpose is to send them back to prison. This is not the case. These officers are not responsible for the actions taken by ex-prisoners; rather, they respond. In many instances, ex-prisoners do not take advantage of the assistance and services available through their probation and parole officers. Of course, there are differences between and among these officers; not all may offer the same level of support. However, the ex-prisoner will never know if there is help available unless he or she asks.

It takes a number of adjustments over time for ex-prisoners to re-establish themselves. Setbacks are a natural part of this process. Ex-prisoners existed in prison, while life on the outside continued to go on without them. When they return to society, they often feel out of step. Their families, friends, and neighborhoods have changed. Technology is different, old and familiar stores have gone out of business, replaced by new and unfamiliar chains. Nothing is as it was before the prison experience. Whether it's boarding the bus with bus fare that was valid several years ago, or discovering that an old girlfriend is involved with his friend, frustration and a sense of disorientation are inevitable. They are part of the adjustment process that every ex-prisoner must go through on the way to transitioning to free society.

Ex-prisoners need to take their time and get used to being free. This may take a few weeks, if not months. This time of adjustment is needed before they make any new and serious commitments. The first few weeks and months outside of prison are not the time to become involved in business ventures with old friends, get married, assume major financial obligations (such as buying a new car or house), or undertake other major life decisions. Rather, this is the time to reflect, focus on making a successful transition, and close the gap between prison and where he/she is currently.

Being grounded spiritually is a good thing. It is my personal opinion that being spiritually grounded is helpful, especially for those coming out of prison. For one, it allows the ex-prisoner to become a part of a supportive community. Moreover, it can plug the ex-prisoner into a set of regular, stable, and positive events and activities that can help promote accountability. Most faith traditions encourage their adherents to be better people who are considerate, thoughtful, reflective,

Biographical Sketch of the Author

Andre's life is a story of the seemingly impossible, the remarkable, and the unbelievable. Born into a large inner-city family that struggled to stay above the poverty line, Andre was the child who got lost in the shuffle. As a result, he was neglected forced to raise himself in a hostile environment. With little supervision or attention, Andre suffered from illiteracy until he was nearly eight. With the help of his 3rd grade teacher, Miss Oliver, he learned how to read, and finally got out from under the brutal teasing he endured at the hands of neighbors and even his own family.

Without guidance and structure, Andre began his slow descent into the netherworld of crime, starting with shoplifting and escalating to armed robbery and assault, all while still in high school. One ray of light was his selection as his inner-city high school's first exchange student. He visited London, Paris, Brussels and Amsterdam. However, this new world was not enough to stop Andre from the path that he was already on. Andre's crimes led him to the Massachusetts Department of Corrections and the Federal Bureau of Prisons for an 18-25 year term. While incarcerated, other charges -- including attempted murder -- were added to his resume.

In the early 1990s, Andre made a fateful decision that he would leave prison, attend college, and work with youth. [Continued at <http://www.projectfootprints.com/about/biography.html>.]

and law-abiding. In times of challenge or trouble, the ex-prisoner has a source of strength, guidance and refuge to which to turn. This can make a positive development in the ex-prisoner's life.

Set up an accountability plan and stick with it. If ex-prisoners do not set up markers to gauge process, slippage is possible, if not inevitable. Even those with the best of intentions can end up back in prison in the absence of a concrete plan that will put checks and balances in place. In contrast, accountability can and should prevent recidivism and other undesirable outcomes.

There are several ways to establish accountability. First, internal accountability involves selecting two meetings/events that the ex-prisoner attends weekly. These could be Bible studies, reading a book in the library, etc. that are done consistently. They are time alone for the ex-prisoner. Second, external accountability involves time commitments to others. These could be regular meetings/events with one or two people. Meeting for coffee, prayer, movies, and other positive activities with stable people is beneficial. When the ex-prisoner finds himself or herself missing these weekly appointments, then it is a good indication that he or she is off-track and needs to re-focus. When a person is first released from prison, it seems like he or she has unlimited time. Once jobs, families, and other commitments are added, free time available diminishes and can crowd out scheduled accountability time.

Making the transition from inmate to free citizen is challenging but not impossible. Taking these five points into consideration will smooth the process.

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